

The Great Adventure Of Mrs. Santa Claus

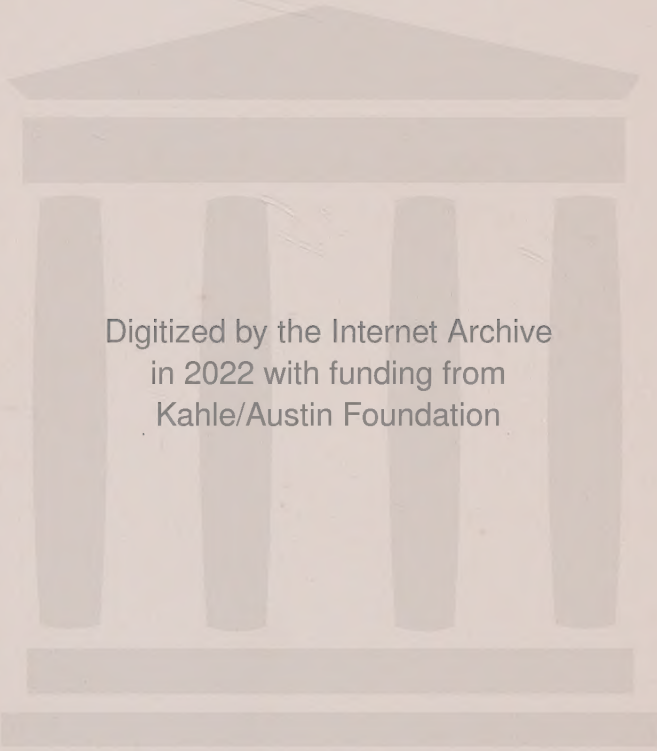
By Sarah Addington



Illustrated by Gertrude A. Kay

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THE GREAT ADVENTURE
OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

By Sarah Addington

THE BOY WHO LIVED IN PUDDING LANE
THE GREAT ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

THE GREAT ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

BY
SARAH ADDINGTON

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
GERTRUDE A. KAY



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	What's To Be Done?	I
II	Several Suggestions	9
III	Help Wanted, Male	16
IV	Strange Visitors	23
V	All of Them Were Fathers	31
VI	Mrs. Claus Issues a Command	38
VII	A Little Girl Named Mary	44
VIII	Benjamin Proves His Wisdom	51
IX	What Happened Next	60
X	Mrs. Claus Has It	66
XI	Bianco	77
XII	Tragedy in the Caravan	86
XIII	Mrs. Claus Is Interrupted	91
XIV	Mrs. Claus Keeps Her Ears Open	96
XV	A Gypsy Christmas	104

ILLUSTRATIONS

It was at school that he heard about Santa Claus for the first time. Mary told him	<i>Frontispiece</i>
Benjamin Bookfellow was writing a book under the shade of the Plot Tree	PAGE 18
"Will he die, Doctor?" she asked him fearfully	" 62
Bianco lived in a little caravan on wheels at the edge of Calico Corner	" 78
There was a tiny Christmas tree, with frosty white bells on it, streaming silver tinsel and a sugar angel right on top	" 104

THE GREAT ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

CHAPTER I

WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

MR. and Mrs. Santa Claus were sitting before the fire one cold December evening when suddenly Santa Claus murmured dismally, as if to himself, "We can never make it."

Mrs. Claus, who was deep in a cozy little snooze, opened her eyes sleepily.

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

“Santa Claus,” said she, “did you speak?”

Her husband looked at her apologetically.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you,” he began, “but——”

“But what, Santa Claus?” urged his wife, wide-awake now. The jolly old fellow looked rather melancholy, she thought.

“I was just saying,” answered Santa, “that we can never make it.”

And now Mrs. Claus did sit up!

“No,” repeated Santa Claus, quite emphatically this time, “we can never make it in all the world, Bessie, going along like this.”

Did Mrs. Claus see a ghost there where her good fat husband was sitting? She certainly saw something

dreadful, to judge from her popping eyes.

“ Never make it ? ” she echoed, unbelieving.

“ Never make it,” he reiterated.
“ Never in all the world.”

“ But, Santa Claus, we have to make it. We simply have to ! ”

“ That’s just it,” replied her husband ; “ we have to and we can’t, and, Bessie, I confess I’m sadly puzzled. I can’t sleep nights — ”

“ You must have slept a little tiny bit last night,” ventured Mrs. Claus, “ for you snored, Santa Claus, you really did.”

“ And I can’t eat my meals,” went on Santa Claus, ignoring the interruption.

“ But you did enjoy your bear

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

steak to-day," Mrs. Claus reminded him, remembering his three generous helpings of that delicacy.

"And I'm sadly puzzled," continued Santa Claus. And to do him justice, the jolly old fellow did look worried, with his laughing mouth drawn down into a little crooked knot, and his jolly face screwed up into forty-five wrinkles and frowns. As for Mrs. Claus, she was now quite the picture of woe, her rosy face done into one great pucker, and her pretty eyes like anxious blue flowers.

For when Santa Claus said that they could never make it, he meant nothing less than that they could never be ready for Christmas with all the toys and dolls and books that the children had asked for, which

WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

was surely a terrible thing, if ever there was a terrible thing in the world.

“The letters are coming in thick and fast every day,” he went on to Mrs. Claus, “and we’re only down to the J’s.”

“Only down to the J’s!” repeated Mrs. Claus aghast. “Santa Claus, I never dreamed things were in such a state.”

“Bessie,” said Santa Claus, “I purposely did n’t tell you, because I did n’t want to worry you.” Good old fellow, was n’t he, not to want to worry his wife? “Yes, we’re only down to the J’s. Right now we’re making a set of blocks for Johnnie, and a railroad train for Jimmie, and a talking doll for Judith, and a white

velvet cat for that baby, Jeremiah, and a lovely tea set for Joanna — Bessie, it's a beautiful tea set," he broke off, "with rosebuds all over it that will make the tea taste just like rosebuds, I know it will."

"Even cambric tea?" inquired Mrs. Claus.

"Even cambric tea," Santa Claus told her. "Yes, I'm sure that even cambric tea will taste like rosebuds in that tea set."

They were both lost in happy contemplation of Joanna's rosebud tea set for a moment before Mrs. Claus broke the spell again.

"But there's nothing for Kitty and Kenneth?" she questioned. "And Molly and Micky, and not a single thing for Nathaniel and Nellie, and

WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

for all the rest of the children in the whole alphabet? ”

“Not a single thing,” replied Santa Claus sadly, “and that’s why I say that we’ll never make it, Bessie. For here it is December first, and we’re only in the J’s. There seem to be so many more children this year, or perhaps the toymakers are getting old and slow. Anyway, we’ll never make it.”

“Of course, we’ll never make it,” agreed Mrs. Claus energetically, “if we only talk about it. But Santa Claus, we’ll simply have to *do* something about it, right here and now.”

“But what’ll we do?” asked Santa Claus hopelessly. “I’ve thought and thought, I have n’t

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

eaten and I have n't slept, and still I can't think of a thing we can do."

"The toymakers — " suggested Mrs. Claus.

"The toymakers are working as hard as they can work," said Santa Claus. "But they have to sleep, and they have to rest, and they can't work every minute. They'd — "

A loud rap at the door stopped Santa in the middle of his sentence.

"Who on earth — " began Mrs. Claus.

"Me!" came a hoarse voice, and a head popped in at them. It was Toymaker Number One.

CHAPTER II

SEVERAL SUGGESTIONS

TOYMAKER Number One was a dry, sharp little man, with big ears and a big heart and a voice that sounded like a cracked old dinner bell. Not that he talked much, Toymaker Number One. No, he was n't much of a hand at conversation. And so to-night, when he appeared before Santa and Mrs. Claus, he bowed and grunted and smiled in his sharp way, and then, without a single word, he thrust a piece of paper into Santa Claus's hands.

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

“What ’s this?” asked Santa Claus.

“Unanimous,” croaked the toymaker oddly, and then without another word, he bolted from the room.

“Well,” said Santa Claus, as he hunted for his spectacles, “he’s a queer one.” He put on his spectacles, turned the paper right side up, and read aloud to Mrs. Claus :

“Whereas, things are going badly in Santa Claus’s workshop, and

Whereas, half the children in the world won’t have any Christmas stockings if something is n’t done pretty quick and sharp,

Therefore, be it resolved that

We, the Twelve Toymakers, sleep no more and rest no more until Christmas Eve, but work and work and work every single minute for the sake of the blessed children.”

SEVERAL SUGGESTIONS

Santa Claus's voice was husky as he finished up the paper, and Mrs. Claus was frankly crying.

"They are the best men in the world," she said shakily, wiping her eyes; "the very best."

"They are that," agreed Santa Claus.

"And such a paper!" admired Mrs. Claus.

"Masterly," pronounced Santa.

"But of course, you could n't let them do it, could you, Santa? You could n't let them work like that for three blessed weeks, with never a snatch of a nap?"

"No, I could n't," replied Santa. "It would make them all sick, Bessie, and they might even die."

"Well, then," went on Mrs. Claus,

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS
with sudden conviction, "we'll just
have to have some Assistant Toy-
makers!"

"Assistant Toymakers!" echoed
Santa.

"Yes," said Mrs. Claus, calmly,
"Assistant Toymakers. We can't
work our toymakers to death, and
we can't let even one child in the
world go without a Christmas stock-
ing, much less half of them, so we'll
simply have to get in some help, for
there's nothing else to do."

"But where would we get Assistant
Toymakers, Bessie?" asked Santa,
almost stupefied by this astonishing
suggestion.

"That I don't know," she an-
swered, "but they must be gotten
somehow and right quickly, too."

SEVERAL SUGGESTIONS

And then, quite unexpectedly, Mrs. Claus herself thought of the *North Country News*, and of advertising for Assistant Toymakers.

“How do you do it?” asked Santa Claus.

“I don’t know,” replied his wife, “but that’s surely the thing. People always advertise when they want help, Santa Claus.”

They thought Hickety-Stickety might know more about such matters, so they sent for him. Hickety-Stickety was Santa Claus’s postmaster, and it must be that he kept very early hours, for as he came hobbling in that night he was wondering what in the world they wanted of him at eight o’clock in the evening. (Hickety-Stickety had a wooden leg, and

his name sounds just the way he sounded as he thumped around there in Santa Claus's house.)

But dear me, although Hickety-Stickety was a postmaster, he knew little enough about newspapers, it was soon discovered. For when Santa Claus said, "Hickety-Stickety, how can we advertise in the *North Country News*, please to tell me," poor old Hickety-Stickety just stared at his master, and replied that, law, Santa Claus, *he* would n't know.

Santa Claus explained a little more.

"I want to advertise in the *North Country News*, Hickety-Stickety, for some help in the workshop. Do you know how I would go about that? Do you understand what I mean?"

SEVERAL SUGGESTIONS

But Hickety-Stickety did n't understand in the least, and could only blink and wink stupidly at Santa and Mrs. Claus and wonder vainly to himself what in creation Santa Claus was talking about.

So that finally Mrs. Claus said, well, never mind, *she'd* attend to it the next morning. She did n't know how to do it, but she'd do it, anyhow. And so much cheered by this prospect, Santa Claus went to bed, thinking to himself what a fine woman his Bessie was, and what a perfect wife for a man in the Christmas toy business.

CHAPTER III

HELP WANTED, MALE

BUT it was n't Mrs. Claus who really attended to the advertisement, after all, for the next morning when Santa Claus announced in the toyshop that Mrs. Claus was going down to the village to-day to see about advertising for help, Toymaker Number One said, "But why don't you call in Benjamin Bookfellow?"

"Sure enough," cried Santa and Mrs. Claus together. "He's the very man!"

So Hickety-Stickety was sent

HELP WANTED, MALE

hurrying off to fetch in Benjamin Bookfellow, the wisest chap in all the North Country.

Now Benjamin Bookfellow had to be wise, for he wrote all the children's fairy stories and adventure books that Santa put in the stockings on Christmas. He never read books, of course, because he did not have time, but he wrote them, and if a man writes books himself, he does n't have to read other people's, I suppose. In fact, Benjamin Bookfellow was kept so extremely busy writing books for children that he sometimes "got behind himself", as he said, and then he had to call on people called Authors, a rather shabby lot, who wrote what he told them to.

To-day, as usual, he was sitting in

his little glass sun parlor, writing a book under the shade of the Plot Tree. The Plot Tree was that luxuriant affair in the corner of Benjamin's sun parlor which he was so careful to water generously every morning and night at seven. And it was Benjamin Bookfellow's most cherished possession, for on it grew the plots for his stories, all ripe and ready for use. So that when he needed a plot, all he had to do was to reach up and nip one off, which is much easier than thinking one up, as any writer fellow will tell you. The plots were delicious looking and as thick as oranges on the tree. And once Toymaker Number Eight, who was really quite a glutton, had attempted to eat one when Benjamin

HELP WANTED, MALE

Bookfellow was n't looking. Oh, dear, what a stomach ache he had then! If you don't believe it, you just try to eat a plot yourself, especially an adventure one, and see what a pain it gives you!

Well, when Hickety-Stickety went into the sun parlor and told Benjamin Bookfellow that he was wanted in the workshop, he got right up, inserted a pencil behind each ear, and went to see what Santa Claus wanted. Benjamin Bookfellow thought it looked literary to have pencils behind his ears like that, but it really only looked like horns.

When he reached the workshop, Santa Claus explained about the advertisement.

"Ah!" exclaimed Benjamin Book-

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS
fellow, wagging his head until
the horns trembled. "Excellent
idea."

Whereupon he took a pencil from
his pocket, the horns being purely
ornamental of course, scratched
awhile on a piece of paper, and
produced the following :

"Help Wanted, Male — Several bright
young men to qualify as assistants to busy ex-
ecutive. Chance for advancement. Refer-
ences required. Apply No. 1 Christmas Tree
Road."

"But it does n't explain what we
want the bright young men for," ob-
jected Santa Claus.

"They never do, Santa Claus,"
elucidated Benjamin Bookfellow,
grandly. "Advertisements never do

HELP WANTED, MALE

explain, for some reason or other.”

“It certainly does n’t sound right, though,” said Mrs. Claus.

“Madame,” Benjamin Bookfellow turned to her elegantly, “believe me, this advertisement is perfect. It’s exactly like them all, to the very letter.”

“But I don’t want it like all the rest,” insisted Santa Claus. “Toymaking is different from any other business. A bright young man might be a fine bookkeeper, Benjamin Bookfellow, but that would n’t make him good at Noah’s Arks, would it?”

“It might,” said Benjamin Bookfellow, strangely. “I’ve often heard of bookkeepers as were excellent at Noah’s Arks, Santa Claus.”

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

So that settled it and Hickety-Stickety was sent down to the *North Country News* with Santa Claus's advertisement for bright young men.

CHAPTER IV

STRANGE VISITORS

BUT the bright young men who lived in the North Country failed to rise to the call of the Busy Executive.

All day the next day Santa Claus waited for applicants, and all day not a single person came. All the next day he waited, and all the next day nobody came. Until on the third day, poor Santa Claus just paced the floor with anxiety, and yet, even when he paced, nobody came. And now it

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

was three days nearer to Christmas, they were still in the J's and no help was in sight. Oh, dear, how depressed Santa Claus was, and how depressed Mrs. Claus was, and how depressed Hickety and Benjamin and the Twelve Toymakers and Mrs. Applecrab, the housekeeper, and Letty, the housemaid, were. And even the cat could n't purr any more, and the canary could n't sing in his old way, but expressed himself in a new minor key that simply was heart-breaking.

“Whatever do you suppose is the matter with these Eskimos?” asked Mrs. Claus, fretfully. “Don't they *want* to work?”

“I don't know,” answered Santa Claus.

STRANGE VISITORS

But Benjamin Bookfellow was beginning to think that he knew what the trouble was: it really must be that the bright young men hadn't understood the advertisement. If they had understood it, they would have answered it. Benjamin Bookfellow knew that, because he had been told at the Great Northern Employment Agency that a good many young men needed work that year, it being such a long, cold winter.

And the truth was that Benjamin Bookfellow's guess was perfectly accurate. The Eskimo men of the North Country had no idea what that high-sounding advertisement was all about, so of course they didn't answer it.

Well, thought Benjamin to himself,

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

“I’ll have to straighten things out a bit.” Whereupon, the afternoon of that third unhappy day, he did himself up in flannels and furs — being literary, he felt the cold, or at least, that’s what he said — and started down to the village, where he expected to visit the Employment Agency and obtain some bright young men.

But Benjamin Bookfellow had hardly gone thirty steps when he met a crowd of shabby, shivering men hastening up toward No. 1 Christmas Tree Road. As Benjamin got closer to these men, he raised his hat, like the gentleman he was, though it nearly froze the top of his head as he did it, and said, “Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon,” they all answered

STRANGE VISITORS

together. And then one, the shabbiest, shiveringest one of them all, spoke further.

“Are you — oh, no, you are not Santa Claus, are you? Oh, no, of course not.”

And certainly nobody ever looked less like Santa Claus than did Benjamin Bookfellow, with his smooth, literary face and his skinny, literary figure and his general air of freezing to death at the least breath of cold air. In fact, the very idea of his being Santa Claus was so preposterous that one of the shabby men actually snickered behind his ragged mitten, which surely was n't very polite of him, to say the least.

But Benjamin Bookfellow was nothing if he was not courteous, and

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

so he pretended he did n't hear the snicker and he said:

"No, sir, I am not Santa Claus. But would you wish to see Santa Claus, sir? Were you —"

"Yes, we were," answered the first shabby man, though how he knew what Benjamin Bookfellow was going to say, I can't imagine.

"Yes, sir, we were, and we are," he went on. "We want to see Santa Claus because we have a very special reason for seeing him."

"Has it anything to do with children?" asked Benjamin Bookfellow. You see, Benjamin Bookfellow was really a sort of office boy for Santa Claus, too. At least, he was acting like an office boy, was n't he, interrogating the visitors like this.

STRANGE VISITORS

“Because,” he went on, “if it has n’t anything to do with children, I’m afraid, sir, I’m really afraid, that Santa Claus could n’t see you.”

“But it has!” they all shouted at him at once, with such a clamor that Benjamin Bookfellow quite jumped at the noise. “Oh, it has! It has everything to do with children. It’s all about children, sir, children and nothing else.”

“In that case,” said Benjamin Bookfellow, bowing gravely, “allow me to escort you, gentlemen, into the presence of Santa Claus.”

And so they all trooped up to Santa Claus’s workshop, and the next minute were bobbing and jerking, taking off their ragged caps, and in general paying their respects to the

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS
amazed Santa Claus, who wondered
who on earth these queer, dingy men
were, and why they had come to see
him.

CHAPTER V

ALL OF THEM WERE FATHERS

SANTA CLAUS soon found out, however, for after he had bowed, too, and Mrs. Claus had dropped a curtsy and the Twelve Toymakers had risen from their workbench and wished the strangers a "Good Afternoon", the first shabby man spoke.

"Santa Claus," said he, fumbling with his old cap, "us men is — well, sir, us men —"

"We men," corrected Benjamin Bookfellow. His literary ear really could not stand such atrocious English.

But the shabby man did not understand, and he said, "Sir?"

"We men," repeated Benjamin Bookfellow.

"Oh! Yes, sir. Well, we men is —"

"Are," suggested Benjamin Bookfellow.

"Sir!" asked the shabby man, again. Dear me, was he deaf, thought Benjamin Bookfellow to himself.

"ARE!" shouted Benjamin Bookfellow. Really, he was particular, was n't he? Why did n't he let the man talk his own way?

"Oh, yes, are," said the shabby man. "Well, us men are —" Now, you see, Benjamin Bookfellow, it was n't any use, after all. Benjamin

ALL OF THEM WERE FATHERS

Bookfellow did see by that time, and only groaned softly to himself. But the shabby man, poor fellow, knew by the groan that something was wrong, and he looked wistfully at Santa Claus.

“Go on,” urged Santa Claus kindly. “Tell me, sir, what are you?”

“Well,” began the man all over again, “us men is fathers, sir.”

“Really,” murmured Santa Claus, “all of you?”

“All of us,” answered the man. “Nary one of us but has n’t got at least six children.”

“Six!” exclaimed Santa Claus.

“Six!” breathed Mrs. Claus.

And “Six!” cried the Twelve Toymakers.

“Yes, sir,” said the shabby man

importantly, "six. At least six, any one of us. As for me, sir, I've got ten. Ten lovely, beautiful children, the very nicest children in the world, Santa Claus, if I do say it as should n't."

But here one of the other shabby men spoke up.

"But mine is just as nice, Santa Claus, my eight is, if not so many, at least as nice."

"Don't say a word against my children," threatened another of the shabby men, and he glowered fiercely at the first one and doubled up his fists. "Say a word against my children and I'll bruise your nose for you, I will."

"Me, too," growled all the others menacingly. And my goodness, there probably would have been a

general riot then and there if Santa Claus had not intervened.

“Here, here,” he cried. “No fights, please. Of course, I understand, and Mrs. Claus understands, and we all understand, sirs, that each of you has the finest children that ever lived. Every father has, and every mother has, too, the finest children that ever lived.”

“And the beautifulest and the smartest and the bestest,” added the first shabby man, his parental pride quite running away with him.

“And the beautifulest and the smartest and the bestest,” agreed Santa Claus, as Benjamin Bookfellow squirmed and vowed that the very next book he wrote would be a grammar book.

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

This seemed to satisfy the shabby men, and so the first one continued to speak.

“But, sir, we’re so, just so awful poor, you see.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Santa Claus kindly. “It’s hard to be poor.”

“Yes, sir,” answered the man, “it’s powerful hard to be as poor as us. Because, you see, we’re so poor we have n’t even got fireplaces, and that, Santa Claus, is why we’ve come to you.”

“You have n’t got fireplaces?” asked Santa Claus.

“No, sir,” the man told him; “we’re too poor for fireplaces, sir. We’re so poor we have to live in model tenements —”

ALL OF THEM WERE FATHERS

“Model tenements?” asked Mrs. Claus.

“Yes, ma’am, model tenements is homes for the poor that is all they should be except fireplaces, and fireplaces they greatly lack in, ma’am. In fact, it’s only the well-to-do as has fireplaces these days, ma’am, them and the country people.”

“And so — ?” asked Santa Claus.

“And so — well, don’t you see,” broke out the man desperately, “that if we don’t have fireplaces, the children can’t send their letters to you, and that therefore they would n’t have no Christmas at all? Oh, don’t you see that, Santa Claus? Don’t you see what it means?”

CHAPTER VI

MRS. CLAUS ISSUES A COMMAND

SO that was it! Of course, that was it. Santa Claus did see it now, and so did Mrs. Claus and the Twelve Toymakers, and even Benjamin Book-fellow forgot grammar, so busy was he seeing it, too. The shabby men's children could n't send their letters to Santa Claus up the chimney because they didn't have any chimneys, and so the fathers had come to see Santa Claus. In fact, the fathers had done more than that; they had brought the children's letters.

MRS. CLAUS ISSUES A COMMAND

For now they were all scratching around in their ragged pockets, and now they were bringing out letters, heaps and heaps of letters on scraps of paper, girls' letters, boys' letters, even little scrawls from the babies in the funny, crookedy way that only babies can write. And when Santa Claus saw all these letters, he was indeed touched.

"So you brought the children's letters?" he said.

"Yes, sir, we brung 'em," answered the spokesman. "We brung 'em, for there was n't another thing to do but bring 'em. And you will come to see our children, won't you, Santa Claus? It would break their hearts if you did n't, sir. You know, the easiest way to break a child's heart is for Santa

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS
Claus not to come on Christmas
Eve."

"Please, sir, you will come, won't you?" chimed in all the other shabby men, and they looked so appealing and so anxious that poor old Santa Claus just wanted to cry, big, grown-up man that he was.

But here was surely a difficult situation for him. For he did n't have nearly enough toys to go around, as it was, and now here were lots and lots more children, poor children, too, who were not provided for. And poor children are the very children for whom Christmas is really the most important.

"Sirs," said Santa Claus, "I will come to your children on Christmas Eve —" Oh, hear that sigh of relief

MRS. CLAUS ISSUES A COMMAND

from the shabby men! "I'll come, although right now, I don't in the least know how I am to get enough toys. But I'll come, I promise you that. For you have traveled all this distance, you have taken the time, and the trouble, you have left your work —"

"Work!" exclaimed they. "Work! Why, Santa Claus, we haven't had work for weeks and weeks, and that's why we're so poor. Work is scarce now and —"

But just then Mrs. Claus, who was certainly worked up over the whole situation if ever a woman was worked up over anything, jumped at the shabby men.

"Then take off your coats!" she commanded. "Take them right off,

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS
and stay here and be the Assistant
Toymakers."

"Of course!" shouted Santa Claus,
and everybody else shouted, "Of
course!" too.

And the next thing those astonished
men knew, they had their coats off,
they had put aprons on, and they
were working as big as life, to help
make the Christmas toys for all the
children in the world.

The strange part about it, too,
was that they really seemed to be
excellent toymakers. Perhaps it was
because they were so eager to help,
and loved children so much, and
understood so well the importance of
Christmas. Perhaps it was because
Santa Claus was such a good teacher.
Anyway, they did do Noah's Arks to

perfection, and they did seem to turn out baseballs and jumping jacks and tricycles, as if they had done nothing else all their lives. So that in a day or two you could hardly tell them from the Toymakers-in-Chief. They even looked different now, since they had baths, and clean clothes, and warm fires and good food, and had shaved their stubbles off and polished up their boots. Mrs. Claus was probably right when she said that all men are pretty much the same if they have soap and razors and plenty of good hot soup.

And so everything seemed to be going simply beautifully in Santa Claus's workshop until just the day before Christmas, when other serious things began to happen.

CHAPTER VII

A LITTLE GIRL NAMED MARY

THE Assistant Toymakers had gone home now, happy as shabby old larks. The work was done, almost all of it. And it was just after dinner on this last day before the great day that Hickety-Stickety came thumping into the workshop where Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus and all the Toymakers were working at top speed to finish up the tag end of the Christmas toys.

Now it was a strange thing for Hickety-Stickety to do, to go into

A LITTLE GIRL NAMED MARY

the workshop at such a critical moment, for Santa Claus had given strict orders that nobody was to interrupt him upon that important day, the busiest of all the year. And yet here came the old postmaster, hickety-stickety, hickety-stickety, walking right into the middle of the room. He walked right past Mrs. Claus, who was making doll dresses faster than doll dresses were ever made before. He walked past all the Twelve Toymakers, who were sitting at their benches in a nice straight row, pounding and hammering as hard as they could go. And he walked right up to Santa Claus, who was down on his knees, putting the squeak in a whole procession of little woolly lambs.

“Well, I declare, Hickety-Stick-

ety," said Mrs. Claus disapprovingly, as she looked up at him.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Hickety-Stickety respectfully. He never would take a hint.

But although he stood there by Santa Claus, waiting for him to look up, Santa Claus seemed not to know that he was there, but just went on, putting squeaks into the little lambs, one after another. As he put the squeaks in, he sang a little song to himself:

"Now you put the jumps in the jumping-jacks,
And I'll put the squeaks in the lambs!"

It was n't much of a song, to be sure, but Santa Claus sang it every year when he worked on the lambs, and seemed to enjoy it thoroughly.

He went on and on, still singing the

A LITTLE GIRL NAMED MARY

song, still putting the squeaks in one after another, and Hickety-Stickety waited and waited, and never once did Santa Claus look up. He had just come to the black sheep of the lot, a little fuzzy fellow with a mischievous eye, and he had just picked out the right squeak for him, when Hickety-Stickety, who could not wait any longer, cleared his throat with a tremendous noise and tapped the floor impatiently with his wooden leg. Santa Claus stopped singing and looked up.

“It’s werry important, sir,” he said to Santa. Hickety’s talk was rather queer, really.

“Oh, a telegram?” inquired Santa Claus, getting up from the floor with a puff and a pant.

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

“No, sir,” replied Hickety, very solemn, “no tullygrum. It’s another letter.”

“Oh, but look here,” remonstrated Santa Claus, “you mustn’t bother me about letters, Hickety-Stickety, on such a day as this. I’m too busy.”

Hickety stood firm on his wooden leg, more solemn than ever.

“We can’t send our babies lambs without squeaks in them, you know,” explained Santa further, “and I haven’t got them half finished, and here it is the day before Christmas.”

Hickety did not move.

“Well, well,” said Santa, seeing that Hickety would stand there until he could say what he wanted to, “let’s have it.”

A LITTLE GIRL NAMED MARY

“Well, sir,” began Hickety, “it’s a letter, a letter from a girl named Mary, and she wants —”

“Oh, well, if she wants something,” broke in Santa Claus, “just give the letter to Toymaker Number Twelve and he’ll attend to her. You know that, Hickety-Stickety, as well as I do.”

“But we ain’t got any sich thing,” burst out Hickety triumphantly. “Santy Claus, sir, we ain’t got any sich thing as Mary wants, and never did we have nuthin’ like it!” Oh, dear, would n’t you think a post-master would talk better than that?

“We have n’t got any such thing?” repeated Santa Claus. “Why, I thought we had everything here that children could possibly want. What

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

in the world does Mary want, Hickety, that we don't have?"

"She wants," began Hickety-Stickety, "she wants —"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, hurry up, Hickety," broke out Mrs. Claus anxiously; for she too, was listening now, and so were the Twelve Toy-makers.

"She wants, Santy Claus — she wants a red-headed doll! And you know our dolls haven't a red head among 'em."

CHAPTER VIII

BENJAMIN PROVES HIS WISDOM

A RED-HEADED doll !
Well, that was a sticker, indeed, for Santa and Mrs. Claus and the Twelve Toymakers, and for a moment they all just looked blankly at one another and did n't know what to say. For whoever would have thought of making a red-headed doll ?

They had straight-haired dolls, and curly-haired ones, and baby dolls who did n't have any hair at all, but were bald-headed, just as old men and babies always are. They had yellow-

haired dolls, and brown-haired ones, and even a Martha Washington doll who had a fine white wig piled up high on her little head. But a red-headed one! Nobody in the whole toyshop had ever thought of making one. Indeed, no little girl had ever wanted one before, until this little girl named Mary had sent in her strange request. It was no wonder Hickety-Stickety had been concerned about Mary's letter. He wasn't such a stupid old thing as he seemed, after all.

Mrs. Claus spoke first. "I never thought of it, Santa," she said to her husband. The dolls were really Mrs. Claus's especial business, you see, and she felt rather ashamed to be caught napping like this.

BENJAMIN PROVES HIS WISDOM

“Nor I,” replied her husband. “And I never would have thought of it, not to my dying day.”

“Nor did we,” spoke up the Twelve Toymakers.

“It never crossed my mind, till I seed the letter,” put in Hickety. (“Seed”, indeed!)

“What in the world will we do?” asked Mrs. Claus, coming down to business.

Nobody replied, for nobody knew what in the world they could do about such a situation.

Then Santa Claus had a ray of hope. “Maybe she is n’t a good little girl, Hickety,” he suggested. “And, of course, if she is n’t a good little girl, why, then we would n’t have to worry about her.”

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

Hickety shook his head mournfully. "She's a werry good little girl," he said. "I looked her up in the record book, and I find that she's turrible good, Santa Claus. She don't even mind washing dishes, and that's the goodest good they is, you know."

Santa Claus sighed. "Is n't it funny that all the children are really good?" he said. "We've never had to skip one for being bad; have we?" Then he brightened up. "But I'm glad. I don't believe I could pass one by on Christmas Eve if he were bad. Well, what shall we do?" said he, coming back to Mary and the red-headed doll.

Toymaker Number Nine stepped up smartly. "Could n't we write

BENJAMIN PROVES HIS WISDOM

her a letter and explain things?" he suggested; "and send her a yellow-haired one instead?"

"Mercy on us, no!" cried out Santa Claus aghast, as Mrs. Claus withered the Toymaker with one look of horror. "Why, we can't disappoint one of our children, Toymaker. How could you even suggest such a thing?"

"Of course we can't," spoke up Mrs. Claus. "We never have disappointed any child as long as we have been in the business, and we won't begin now."

Toymaker Number Nine, feeling rather flat, fell back behind the others.

"But, dear me," went on Mrs. Claus, "how will we ever get a red-headed doll at this late hour?"

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

“Let’s call in Benjamin Bookfellow,” suggested Toymaker Number One.

“Sure enough!” cried Santa and Mrs. Claus together. “He’s the very man.”

When Hickety-Stickety went into the sun parlor and told Benjamin Bookfellow that he was wanted in the workshop, he looked a bit worried, but he got up and went, of course.

When he got there, however, he explained the cause of his worry to Santa Claus. “I’m sorry, sir,” he said to Santa, “but I’m in a great hurry, and I hope you won’t keep me long. I’m just finishing up a bear story, and I’ve left a little boy all alone on page seventy-nine with

BENJAMIN PROVES HIS WISDOM

an extremely hungry bear. He might be eaten up, if I stay away too long."

"Is he a brave little boy?" asked Santa Claus.

"Yes, sir, very brave," answered Benjamin Bookfellow.

"Then he'll be all right," said Santa Claus. "We won't keep you but a moment, anyway, but we do need you to help us out of a grave difficulty."

He then told Benjamin Bookfellow all about Mary and her strange request for a red-headed doll. And Benjamin, putting his glasses down lower on his nose than usual, and shifting on his feet, and rubbing his hands together, and wagging his horns, frowned hard at the woolly

lambs, who had n't done a thing to be frowned at, of course, and did some deep thinking for a moment.

Then he spoke. "Well, sir, I suggest that you go out into the woods, dig up some Indian paint root, make of it a red dye and dye one of the blond wigs red. Thus, if you hurry it through, Santa Claus, Mary can have her red-headed doll to-morrow, as neat as anything, and everybody will be happy."

Now, you see, Benjamin Book-fellow was a clever chap. For this was the best possible way out of the difficulty, and everybody in the toy-shop knew it was the best possible way the minute Benjamin suggested it. All the Toymakers murmured with approval, Santa Claus laughed

BENJAMIN PROVES HIS WISDOM

aloud with joy, Hickety-Stickety gave a good grunt, while Mrs. Claus just jumped up and down with excitement and delight.

And so it was decided that Santa Claus should hasten out into the big deep woods to find the Indian paint root. Whereupon he began that minute to pull on his rubber boots, while Mrs. Claus hunted up his ear pads, the Twelve Toymakers began pounding and hammering again, and Benjamin Bookfellow hastened back to page seventy-nine. Benjamin was just in time, too, to rescue the little boy from the bear, for the bear had controlled himself as long as he could and was licking his chops even then.

CHAPTER IX

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

IT was four o'clock in the afternoon when Mrs. Claus looked up from her sewing and saw Santa Claus coming back through the snow. But what was the matter with the jolly old fellow? Oh, something dreadful must have happened! His fat cheeks were screwed up tight as if he were in pain, he staggered as he walked, and he was dragging one poor leg like a limp rag. Oh, dear! Mrs. Claus dropped her sewing and her scissors, flew to the door and out into the snow where Santa Claus was.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

“Oh, Santa darling, what is the matter?” she cried. She had never been so frightened.

Santa Claus, trying hard not to make faces, answered her. “I fell,” he said. “I could n’t quite see over my stomach, and I fell over a big log while I was getting the Indian paint root.” He pointed to the root in his greatcoat pocket, and then he groaned a very soft little groan under his breath. He was trying hard not to make noises, but somehow they would come, anyway.

“Oh, oh! Poor Santa!” exclaimed Mrs. Claus.

Then, little and light as she was, Mrs. Claus supported Santa on her arm, and got him into the house, though afterwards she herself said she

did n't know how she did it, he being so big and fat. But she did, and pretty soon Santa Claus was laid out flat on the parlor sofa by the fire, very glad to be there, too, and they were waiting for old Doctor Mistletoe, the best physician in the whole North Country.

When old Doctor Mistletoe got to Santa's house and examined the leg, he said immediately, "This is a very serious affair, Santa Claus." And then he proceeded to make it more serious for Santa by punching and poking at it again, until the poor fellow made worse faces than ever with the pain of it. "Yes, very serious," repeated the old doctor, and he turned to Mrs. Claus, who stood there, white and shaky.

"Will he die, Doctor?" she asked



"Will he die, Doctor?" she asked him fearfully. Page 62.

him fearfully. Supposing Santa Claus should die, she thought to herself, and almost broke out crying at the mere thought.

But the doctor smiled at the question. "Oh, no," said he comfortingly. "Santa Claus won't die, Mrs. Claus. Folks don't die of broken legs."

"Broken legs!" cried Mrs. Claus.

"Broken legs!" echoed Santa Claus more faintly. "Is my leg really broken, Doctor Mistletoe?"

"I never saw a leg more broken," Doctor Mistletoe assured them cheerfully.

And somehow both Santa Claus and his wife took comfort from the fact that since legs had to be broken, this was as complete a job of it as

Doctor Mistletoe had ever seen. So Mrs. Claus beamed proudly at Santa, who stopped making faces long enough to smile proudly back.

But old Doctor Mistletoe had become grave again. "Of course, you understand, Santa Claus," he began, "that men with broken legs don't go out and about, don't you?"

Santa Claus looked rather alarmed. "Well, I have to go out to-night," he said. "This is Christmas Eve."

But Doctor Mistletoe was shaking his head.

"You can fix me up," pleaded Santa Claus, quite frightened now, "so's I can leave here by midnight, can't you, doctor?"

Doctor Mistletoe was shaking his head harder than ever.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

“My good friend,” he said sadly, “you can’t go out to-night at midnight or any other night for a long time.”

“But I have to,” interrupted Santa excitedly. “This is Christmas Eve, and I have to go. You know that.”

Doctor Mistletoe kept on wagging his head, and every wag said as plain as day, no, no, no! “I’m sorry —” he began.

“I’m going, I tell you,” cried Santa Claus bravely, and he tried to rise from his chair. But the leg would n’t let him, and he sank back as suddenly as if he had been struck, his rosy cheeks quite pale.

“Come, Mrs. Claus,” said Doctor Mistletoe abruptly, “help me here. We must get him to bed and set that leg without another moment’s delay.”

CHAPTER X

MRS. CLAUS HAS IT

SO there he was, laid up in bed on Christmas Eve, the Santa Claus who had been filling the stockings of boys and girls the world over for all these years. He was laid up in bed, it was Christmas Eve, and all the children in the world were hanging up their stockings and going early to bed, waiting for him and expecting him — and yet he could not stir forth a step.

And as he said to Mrs. Claus, the pain in his leg was nothing compared to the pain he felt in his heart to

think of the poor children and their empty stockings the next day. The tears came to his eyes as he said this, and they came to Mrs. Claus's eyes, too, and for a moment they just blinked mournfully at each other through their tears.

But the next minute Mrs. Claus gave a little jump, for all the world like the toy jumping-jacks of Santa Claus's song.

Santa Claus looked at her astonished.

"I've got it!" she exclaimed.
"I've got it, Santa Claus!"

"What have you got?" he asked her with great concern. He was sure that whatever it was, it was very serious.

"I've got it!" she cried out again.

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

“And this is it. Since you can’t go out to-night, I’ll go myself, sir. I’ll go down the chimneys and into the houses, and I’ll fill the stockings myself, I will, so the children shan’t be disappointed.”

Santa looked at his remarkable wife admiringly. “Bessie, that’s the very thing,” he said soberly.

Then he sat up in bed and began to shout.

“Toymakers!” he called. “Come here! Ho, Benjamin Bookfellow! Get busy, everybody! Hurry, hurry, hurry!”

Whereupon things began to spin as merrily as tops there in Santa Claus’s house.

The Twelve Toymakers were hustled about their work of finishing

MRS. CLAUS HAS IT

up, and Benjamin Bookfellow was set to the task of putting the rest of the squeaks in the lambs. Hickety-Stickety was entrusted with the important job of dyeing the wig and gluing it on the doll for Mary, while Mrs. Claus and Mrs. Applecrab and Letty, and even Doctor Mistletoe, all began to pack bags as fast and furiously as their hands could work. For much time had been lost that afternoon on account of Santa Claus's accident, and now it was getting into the night, and in a few hours it would be time for Mrs. Claus to start.

Finally everything was finished. All the games and the books and the toys were packed into the bags; all the candy was in boxes and sacks; all the dolls were stowed away carefully

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS
in the sleigh. Mary's red-headed doll was right on top, because the glue, Hickety explained, was still a little wettish.

When all was ready, everybody in the whole household gathered together in Santa's room while he gave instructions to his wife.

"You'd better wear my clothes," he began.

"Oh!" shrieked Mrs. Claus and blushed a fine purple.

"Santa Claus is quite right," spoke up old Doctor Mistletoe.

"But —" started Mrs. Claus, and then blushed a still finer purple.

Santa Claus looked at Doctor Mistletoe in perplexity, Doctor Mistletoe looked at Benjamin Bookfellow, and for once, Benjamin Bookfellow

MRS. CLAUS HAS IT

did not know what was the matter, so he looked at Mrs. Applecrab. And she did know.

"She does n't like the idea of wearing trousers," explained Mrs. Applecrab, and by this time poor, modest Mrs. Claus was the color of a ripe blackberry, she was so embarrassed.

"My dear," said Santa Claus firmly, "there must be no notions."

"No, there must be no notions," repeated Doctor Mistletoe wisely.

"For, you see," went on Santa Claus, "it would n't be really Christmas if a lady in skirts delivered the children's toys. It is only really Christmas when a fat fellow in a red suit goes around in the sleigh. So you, my dear, must wear the red suit

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS
and stuff yourself with pillows; and nobody must ever know that it was n't Santa Claus himself — myself, I mean — well, you know what I mean."

The worst of it was that Mrs. Claus did know what he meant, and she knew that he was right — that Christmas would not really be Christmas if a lady in skirts delivered the children's toys. In fact, she was not sure it would be Christmas, anyway, with Santa Claus home in bed. And she said this to Santa Claus and Benjamin Bookfellow.

"Yes," Benjamin Bookfellow answered, "it will be all right, Mrs. Claus, if you only look like Santa Claus, act like Santa Claus, and never, never let anybody know that

MRS. CLAUS HAS IT

it is n't Santa Claus. For if they think that it was Santa Claus that came this Christmas, it will be quite the same to them, you know. You see, you are Mrs. Santa Claus; don't forget that."

(As if she could ever forget that wonderful fact, thought Mrs. Claus to herself.)

"Very well," she said aloud. "I'll wear the red suit and stuff myself up with pillows. I really must, I see, for the sake of the children's Christmas." But she told herself that she'd take her skirts along with her, for she would certainly feel more lady-like if they were near by. And having decided that, she began to have other fears.

"I never drove a reindeer in my

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS
life," she spoke up, "much less
eight."

"They'll go of their own accord,"
Santa Claus assured her, "knowing
the way as they do."

"And I never had any occasion to
slide down a chimney," she added.

"Just step in and down you go, as
easy as pie," he told her.

"I might leave the wrong things
for the right children," she objected
further.

"Hickety will give you the list,"
he answered.

And so, after all, there was nothing
for Mrs. Claus to do except to dress
up in Santa's suit, stuff herself with
pillows, kiss him good-bye, hop into
the sleigh, and drive off on her won-
derful errand as Santa Claus's substi-

tute. There was nothing else for her to do, and so she did it, though her little feet trembled in Santa's big boots, her heart flopped wildly under the pillows, and her hand shook as she took up the reins and said "Giddap" in a voice that was only a weak imitation of Santa's big, hearty tones.

Thus she went off frightened, but courageous, out of the North Country, down into the towns and villages and farmlands, while the children in their beds dreamed of Santa Claus, and Santa Claus in his bed groaned with pain. From roof to roof she went, and down the chimneys, and in every stocking she left the Christmas gifts that the children had asked Santa Claus for. She even left some that

they had n't asked for, for Santa Claus always has many more toys than his list calls for, you know. Well, on and on she went, and pretty soon she discovered that she was not frightened at all any more, for playing Santa Claus was really such jolly good fun, and every place she went the children were fast asleep. In fact, every child in the world was fast asleep that Christmas Eve, except one little boy.

CHAPTER XI

BIANCO

NOW, you must not think that little boy was a bad little boy, because he had not gone to sleep on Christmas Eve, as all children are supposed to do. For he was not a bad little boy at all. But the reason he was awake was that he didn't know that he ought to be asleep. In fact, he did not know much about Christmas at all, for he was a little gypsy boy, and had never had a visit from Santa Claus in all his life.

His name was Bianco, and he was

six years old, and he lived in a little caravan on wheels at the edge of Calico Corner. Calico Corner was the same town where Mary lived, the Mary who had asked for the red-headed doll.

Usually Bianco and his grandmother, his father and uncles were in Calico Corner only a little while in the summer. This year, however, his old grandmother had got very lazy, so that when it came time to wander down into the South, the old, wrinkled woman had said she would just stay where she was. And stay she did, and Bianco stayed with her, in the little house on wheels, while the men took the horses and went into the South.

The people of Calico Corner were



Bianco lived in a little caravan on wheels at the edge of Calico Corner.
Page 78.

BIANCO

quite interested when it became known that old gypsy Doro and her little grandson were going to stay at the edge of the town all winter. Not that they ever saw Doro. For she never so much as poked her sharp old beak outside the little door of the caravan, but sat by the old stove inside, smoking a bitter pipe, drinking dark tea and dreaming of her young days when she was beautiful and wild and free.

And Bianco? Well, Bianco wandered around the countryside by himself. He made whistles to blow out of sticks, and arrowheads out of stones, and told himself stories of the great Spanish gypsies who were his ancestors. But it was only for a few weeks that he was allowed to do this, for

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

one day Farmer John came to the little caravan and told old Doro that school was open, and that Bianco ought to go.

The old woman grunted and took another pipeful, and the next thing Bianco knew, he was in a little brick schoolhouse every day from nine to three.

It was at school that he heard about Santa Claus for the first time. It was Mary who told him.

“But who is he?” asked Bianco.

“He’s the good Christmas saint — no, he is n’t exactly a saint either — fairy, I guess — oh, he’s just Santa Claus.”

But Bianco knew what fairies were, and he had a dim idea about saints, and so he almost knew what Santa

Claus was like, though not quite, of course. When he went home that night he was thinking very hard about Santa Claus, and after he and Doro had taken their tea and bread and bacon, he spoke to her about it.

“Dost know of a being called Santa Claus?” he asked her, as she pulled on her pipe and looked deep into the coals of the little open stove.

Doro did not answer. She was not the most polite old woman in the world.

“Dost know of a being called Santa Claus?” asked the little boy again, “who comes—who comes in this month to all children?”

Doro took the pipe from her mouth and spoke. “This month brings but cold and ice. ’T would

be better, after all, to be in the South.”

But Bianco would not be distracted from his subject, and he told her as she dozed off what he had heard about the Santa Claus of the children in Calico Corner.

“If you believe in him, he comes,” finished up Bianco, “and brings the beautiful things, bright balls of color and —”

“Earrings?” queried the old woman, awakened at last.

Next to tea and tobacco, earrings were what old Doro liked best. She had forgotten that earrings were meant only for little pink ears, but every day hung her big, flabby yellow ones with gaudy brass, though it was true she was not interested in other

details of her toilet, — washing, for instance.

“Yes, earrings,” said Bianco eagerly.

But Doro was asleep again, and Bianco was left to think about Santa Claus all by himself. The next night he asked Doro again, and he seemed so anxious that the old woman took her pipe out of her mouth for one of her infrequent speeches.

“Things like that are not for us,” she told him. “You are Bianco and I am Doro, and for us are the winds and the fire and the song. They” — she pointed a dirty thumb in the direction of Calico Corner—“may have their sayings and their ways and their ugly houses. But you are Bianco, and you must not forget that.”

Then she went to sleep again, and poor Bianco was left once more to wish for Santa Claus, for even if he were Bianco, he was a little boy just the same, and never had he wished for anything so hard as he wished for Santa Claus to visit him.

“I’m afraid he won’t,” he told Mary the next day, “because I’m a gypsy.”

But Mary explained to him that Santa Claus didn’t care what you were, so long as you were good. She was sure, she told him, that if he wrote Santa Claus a letter, he would not fail to come. And so one night, Bianco scratched off a letter, which nobody could have read except Santa Claus, for it was hardly writing at all. Indeed, old Doro,

BIANCO

when she found it the next day, did not dream it was a letter. It looked like nothing but aimless scribbling to her, so she stuffed up a crack in the window with it. And that was the reason, you see, that Bianco was not on Mrs. Claus's list, after all, as she went on her rounds that Christmas Eve.

CHAPTER XII

TRAGEDY IN THE CARAVAN

BIANCO thought he should burst with excitement that night as he tried to eat his supper, and he could hardly wait until his grandmother should roll on to her bunk and sink into her deep, snoring sleep. For he had not told her that Santa Claus was coming to him that night. He knew that she would only grunt and shake her head, so he preferred to hang up his stocking all by himself, and to wait by himself, too, for his marvelous visitor.

TRAGEDY IN THE CARAVAN

At last Doro tumbled down to sleep. Bianco then took off his little scarlet stockings, just as Mary had told him to, and he hung them on a nail by one of the small, high windows of the caravan. They had holes in them, those scarlet stockings, but Bianco did not notice that, for he was used to holes. He stood and looked at the stockings hanging there and laughed aloud with glee at the thought of the beautiful things Santa Claus would put in them. When he laughed, Doro gave a loud snort in her sleep, so Bianco was careful not to do it again, though he had never felt so full of laughter in all his life. Very early he crept into bed to wait for Santa Claus.

Mary had forgotten to tell him

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

that he must go to sleep, I suppose, or if she had told him, he had not quite understood. For there he lay, wide-awake and staring at the sky, waiting for the first sound of the bells that Mary had told him about, ready for the first glimpse of the jolly Christmas Santa Claus.

Once he got up and without lighting the candle he hunted up a piece of bread and a nubbin of cold meat. These he put out where Santa Claus might find them; the old fellow would surely be hungry after his long journey in the cold, Bianco thought. Then he slipped quietly back into bed to wait some more. Once his eyelids, fringed with heavy drops of sleep, closed tight, but something inside him said "Wake up!" and he did so with a jump.

TRAGEDY IN THE CARAVAN

At last, as he lay quiet and expectant, looking at the stars, he heard a far-off music, a sweet clang of a noise that could be nothing else but Santa Claus's bells. He jumped to his feet and ran to the door to fling it open. There, coming down from Farmer John's house, was the sleigh, overflowing with boxes and bundles. There were the reindeer prancing and leaping. He could not see Santa Claus, for the sleigh went too fast for that, but he knew that this was he just the same. Oh, how happy Bianco was at that moment. . . .

And then, before he knew it, the beautiful vision had passed. He stared and stared, but it was gone. Santa Claus had gone by him, after all !
He was left out because he was a gypsy boy !

For a moment Bianco wished he were a girl like Mary, so that he could cry; for boys, and especially gypsy boys, do hate to cry, don't they? Then the next thing he knew he was out in the snow in his bare feet, and without a coat, running, running, running, to catch up with the flying sleigh. On and on he ran, breathless and desperate, and still the sleigh was far ahead, indeed so far ahead that he could scarcely hear the bells any more.

CHAPTER XIII

MRS. CLAUS IS INTERRUPTED

MRS. CLAUS had come to Mary's house and was just putting the red-headed doll in Mary's stocking, when she heard a noise on the front porch. First it was the sound of soft footsteps, then the door knob was tried, and after that, there was a thud on the floor, followed by nothing at all.

"Mercy on us!" said Mrs. Claus to herself, "it's a burglar as sure as I'm standing here."

She listened some more, but all was quiet.

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

“Maybe it’s only a poor beggar,” she whispered. “I’ll peep and see.”

And when she peeped from the window, what do you think she saw? It was not a burglar, oh, no! It was not even a poor beggar. It was little Bianco, who had run until he was worn out and who was now lying there at Mary’s door, fast asleep.

“Why, it’s a little boy,” cried good Mrs. Claus, as she hastened out to him.

And what do you suppose Mrs. Claus did then? Did she run, so that the little boy should not wake up and catch her there? Did she hurry up the chimney again and into the waiting sleigh that was on Mary’s roof at that minute? No, that was the funny part. When Mrs. Claus saw poor little Bianco fast asleep there

against the door, she forgot everything except that here was a little boy who needed her help. So she carried him quickly into the house and out into Mary's mother's warm kitchen, and she laid him so gently on some pillows by the fire that Bianco hardly stirred in his sleep.

"His poor little feet look pretty cold," she whispered. She found an old blanket and wrapped them up. "He'll be hungry when he wakes up," she thought, and began hunting around for milk to heat.

But just then she heard another noise. It was a noise like this: Tip-toe, tip-tap, tip-toe, tip-tap, and it was coming down the back stairs. And suddenly Mrs. Claus became possessed of a panic of fear.

“Oh, dear, what am I doing?” she asked herself. “Here are people wide-awake in this house, and here I am, right and ready to be discovered at any minute.”

Tip-toe, tip-tap, tip-toe, tip-tap—the noise was coming closer and closer.

“Well, I must do something,” decided Mrs. Claus, with which she leaped with one long stride into the kitchen closet.

It was dark in the closet and Mrs. Claus with her pillows was unusually fat. Bang! Down crashed something from somewhere. “Mercy on us!” breathed Mrs. Claus. “What was that?” It made a noise like a falling milk pan, and she stooped to pick it up. Bump! Something else fell as she moved. The ironing board,

she thought. Oh gracious, would these noises never cease? And just then, as she moved ever so little, crash! It sounded like a whole set of dishes. And poor Mrs. Claus just wrung her hands there in the dark.

“I don’t know how to manage these pillows,” she wailed to herself. “I don’t see how Santa Claus gets around with his stomach at all.”

She stood up straight as a soldier, almost afraid to breathe, lest something else should happen, and she should be found out. Tip-toe, tip-tap, the steps came closer, and just then Mrs. Claus felt a dreadful thing coming on her.

CHAPTER XIV

MRS. CLAUS KEEPS HER EARS OPEN

IT began with a tickle in her nose and a fuzzy feeling in her throat. Her eyes watered and her nose tickled still harder, and finally it came: "ker-choo, ker-choo!" the most tremendous sneeze that anybody ever heard of.

"I'm done for," said the frantic Mrs. Claus to herself.

But still the sleeping Bianco did not awaken, although how could poor Mrs. Claus know that, shut up tight there in that dark, hot closet? Now

the steps, tip-toe, tip-tap, had come very, very close, a door was opened — it was the back-stairs door, Mrs. Claus guessed — and she heard a voice.

“Bianco!” said the voice, a little-girl voice, whispering excitedly.

It was Mary. Good thing, indeed, that Mrs. Claus was in the closet then, was n’t it?

Bianco awoke, then, for she heard him say sleepily, “Mary!”

“But what are you doing here?” Mary’s voice asked.

“Oh!” Bianco was fully awake now. “Oh, Mary, the Santa Claus passed me by!”

What was this? Mrs. Claus stood up straighter than ever in the closet. Who was this little boy? Had she really passed him by? Yes; for he

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS
was a strange little boy; there was nobody on her list named Bianco.

“Yes,” Bianco went on, “he passed me by. I heard the bells, Mary, and I saw the reindeer, but he didn’t stop. So I ran to follow him, but I didn’t find him.”

There were tears in Bianco’s voice. Mrs. Claus could hear them. There were tears in his soft brown eyes, too, but Mrs. Claus could not see them from her dark hiding place.

“But how did you get here?” persisted Mary.

Bianco did not answer immediately, and Mrs. Claus quaked in the closet. Supposing that he should even half way remember that she had carried him in. Santa Claus and Benjamin Bookfellow would not like

MRS. CLAUS KEEPS HER EARS OPEN
that at all. Then she heard Bianco's
voice again and stopped her quaking
to listen.

"I don't know," he said. "I just
don't remember."

Oh, what a relief that was to Mrs.
Claus!

"Bianco," said Mary suddenly,
"maybe it was a fairy who brought
you here!"

"Maybe it was," replied Bianco.

"Or, Bianco, maybe it was Santa
Claus himself."

Bianco did not answer. There
was nothing to say in answer to this
remarkable notion.

"No," said Mary, "it was n't Santa
Claus, I guess. I don't know,
though."

Then Mrs. Claus heard Mary move

a little, and she heard her whispering again, very fast and low. Mrs. Claus had to lean 'way forward to hear, "though I'll knock down everything in the closet, I suppose," she muttered to herself.

"But, Bianco," Mary was saying, "we must not stay here. We must hurry back to bed and go right to sleep. For Santa Claus does not come at all if we're not asleep. That's the reason he didn't stop at your house, I think." Of course, Mary did not know that Bianco's letter had got lost, did she? "Now you go home —"

Mary had not quite finished what she was saying when Mrs. Claus suddenly, and without any warning, began to make more dreadful noises. She

had not moved an inch, she thought, or hardly breathed a breath, yet pop! Something snapped! It was the belt on Santa Claus's coat, which had burst quite open. Plump, plump, out came the pillows, rolling everywhere. Bang, crash, rattle; the pillows were knocking things right and left.

"I never in all my life!" groaned Mrs. Claus angrily to herself. "I never did."

She was waiting now for the children to open the door and catch her, and she was wondering just what Santa Claus would say to her when he found out the horrible truth. But she waited and waited and waited and they did n't come. Indeed they did n't come, for Mary and Bianco,

though they heard the noises plain enough, were frightened themselves. For they thought a funny thing. They thought Mrs. Claus was mice!

“Sh-h-h!” cautioned Mary.

Bianco sh-h-h’ed obediently.

“A mouse!” he said, as the noises increased.

“A hundred mice,” cried Mary;
“mice, I mean.”

“Let’s fly,” they both said.

And fly they did. Mary flew upstairs, and Bianco flew out and home, and finally Mrs. Claus emerged from the closet, hot and “all to pieces” as she said. But she soon had the pillows tucked in tight again, and the belt fastened. She was soon hurrying again about her business, for the night was nearly over, and she had

one especially important stocking to fill yet. Can you guess whose stocking that was?

As for Bianco, well, he did just as he was told. He ran straight home to the caravan, as fast as only a gypsy boy can run. He jumped into bed, and in bed he made himself go to sleep that minute. The going-to-sleep part was pretty hard, but he hid his head under the covers and said "Santa Claus, Santa Claus, Santa Claus," to himself in a kind of sing-song, and the next minute he was asleep, just as Mary had told him to be.

CHAPTER XV

A GYPSY CHRISTMAS

THE next morning when he awakened, sure enough, the stockings were filled. Things were spilling out of them, things were falling through the holes, things were piled high on the window sill. There was even a tiny Christmas tree, just big enough for a caravan, with frosty white bells on it, streaming silver tinsel and a sugar angel right on top.

“Oh!” screamed Bianco, springing out of bed.

A GYPSY CHRISTMAS

He ran over to his grandmother and shook her awake, and for once that old woman opened her eyes wide at the sight of the tree and the stockings.

Mrs. Claus had come, you see, right from Mary's house. She had stuffed the stockings and trimmed the tree for Bianco just as she had done for every other child in the world, to make him as happy as all the other children were. But Bianco was the happiest of all, I believe, for it was his first really and truly Christmas, and first times for things are usually the best times, somehow.

Even old Doro was happier than she had been for a long time. For lo and behold, besides the books and toys and games for Bianco, there was

a pair of fine earrings for Doro. They were big earrings made of gold and jet, the very earrings that old Doro had been dreaming of all her life and had never got before. Isn't it wonderful how those Clauses always know what people want, even gypsies?

And so it was that Santa Claus got help in his workshop, the poor men's children had their stockings filled, Mary, of Calico Corner, got her red-headed doll, Santa Claus broke his leg, Mrs. Claus took his place, and Bianco, the little brown-eyed gypsy, had his first Christmas. It looked pretty bad for Santa for a while, it looked bad for the poor men's children, it looked bad for Mary, and then it looked still worse for everybody when Santa Claus broke his leg; and Bianco

A GYPSY CHRISTMAS

thought it looked bad for him when the reindeer went whizzing past.

But it really all turned out beautifully, after all, due entirely to the enterprise of that astonishing woman, Mrs. Claus. For it was she who thought of the Assistant Toymakers, she who kept the poor men to help, she who played Santa Claus, she who really saved the day several times over. She even nursed Santa Claus's leg so well that it got strong and sound again twice as fast as anybody else's broken leg ever did.

And the best of it all was that nobody ever knew the difference. Nobody until this very moment ever knew that Santa Claus had to miss a Christmas Eve and that his brave and adventurous wife took his place.

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. SANTA CLAUS

Mary did n't know it. Bianco did n't know it. You did n't know it, did you? And I did n't, I'm sure. And yet that's exactly what happened one fine white Christmas Eve when we were all asleep.

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